**Online World Conference -- Abolish Nuclear Weapons, Resist and Reverse the Climate Crisis, For Social and Economic Justice**

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**The Pandemic, the Geopolitical Struggle for Power & the Urgency of Common Security**

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**Vice-President International Peace Bureau**Pandemics like wars accelerate profound structural changes that were already in motion. The structures of the world disorder and the imbalance of political, military and economic power are now in the process of changing decisively. Covid-19’s impacts will be on the order of the First World War and the Great Depression.

**Authoritarianism**

Covid-19 has undermined the neoliberal assault on what Steve Bannon termed the administrative state. People across the world are turning to their governments for desperately needed health services and financial support. The pandemic is thus strengthening state power and nationalism in many countries.

With covid-19 claiming tens, potentially hundreds, of thousands of lives of poor and low wage workers, immigrants and people of color, the reality of glaring – often deadly - injustices and structural violence has become unavoidable. Unanswered is the question of whether the power of oligarchies and plutocracies will be successfully challenged or further crystalized. We must do all that we can to ensure that unlike Germany in the early 1930s, the severe economic dislocations that we will be living with for some time don’t serve as petri dishes for 21st century fascism.

In the near-term, the pandemic reinforces authoritarian regimes. Across the world new laws and edicts allow “governments to detain people indefinitely and infringe on freedoms of assembly and expression…which could …shape civic life, politics and economies for decades to come.” Here in the U.S., fear and confinement to our homes create what Hannah Arendt described as the essential conditions for the imposition of totalitarianism. This is not an inevitable outcome. It depends on what we do.

Donald Trump claimed that he has absolute power, “total authority.” In much the same way that he extorted the Ukrainian government, Trump is attempting to bend state governments to his will by withholding essential medical equipment and sicking armed demonstrators on state capitals. He fired the Pentagon and National Intelligence inspector generals who played important roles in protecting constitutional limits on the practice of exercising coercive power and preventing corruption. Attorney General Barr has transformed the Department of Justice into the tyrant’s sword and shield. And, Trump and his allies are doing all that they can to prevent free and fair elections in November.

Elsewhere, Chinese repression and lies initially fueled the pandemic. But, Beijing’s total lock downs, its advanced surveillance technologies, and its police state mechanisms have apparently contained the virus, even as it spreads globally. Orban in Hungary, Modi in India, Duterte In the Philippines and others are using the virus to reinforce their dictatorial powers.

**Geopolitical Struggle for Power**

Meanwhile the geopolitical struggle for regional and world power continues under the existential threats of nuclear weapons and the climate emergency. It also takes place within the context of the Thucydides Trap, the tragic history of major wars growing out of the inevitable tensions between rising and declining powers.

U.S. power and influence have been in decline since the Vietnam War, a dynamic accelerated by U.S. wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Beijing is now seen as Washington’s “peer competitor” with growing economic, military, diplomatic and soft power influence across Asia, the Global South, and increasingly in Europe. Trump’s America-First disregard and alienation of allies have accelerated U.S. decline.

Stephen Walt at Harvard University has written that ‘Coronavirus will accelerate the shift of power and influence from west to east.” Certainly, with failed pandemic responses in Europe and the US , “the power of the western brand” has weakened. This is not to ignore that China’s early pandemic deceits and failures have cost its government the trust of many of its people and of people in other nations.

In Europe, the centrifugal forces weakening the E.U. have also been reinforced just as Germany and France were seeking to transform the E.U. into a major military – potentially nuclear – power. National boundaries have been reestablished to limit the spread of the virus. In Hungary, Orban blocked an essential transportation route across the continent. And northern European nations provided scant pandemic assistance to Italy and Spain, opening the way for greater Chinese influence.

For a generation, the bi-partisan Washington consensus has been the imperative of “containing China”. Recall that Obama launched the Pivot to Asia and the Transpacific Partnership to contain China militarily and economically. Today Trump and the GOP are engaged in a new Cold War with China and have made China their scapegoat to deflect attention from their own cold-hearted and calculated pandemic failures and to prevail in November’s elections. And coven of China Hawks is pushing “to punish and challenge China with new sanctions, mandates for domestic manufacturing and controls on American exports” The pandemic also provides cover for the Trump-Navarro campaign to decouple the U.S. & Chinese economies.

The Chinese state and its mega corporations are hardly innocents. China has claimed sovereignty over 80% of the South China Sea at the expense of other nations. It has engaged in massive intellectual property theft. And its ghastly human rights violations cannot be ignored. Nonetheless, as Simon Tisdall wrote in *The Guardian*, “The virus has become a [Chinese] soft power tool to overtake its superpower rival.”

Yet, even as Trump alienates the United States’ Asia-Pacific allies, the Pentagon is reducing deployments in Europe, Africa and Latin American to boost its forces in Asia and the Pacific. The strategic force driving the $100 billion increase in Pentagon spending has been development and deployment of new weapons systems – including new nuclear weapons - to maintain U.S. military superiority over China. The Trump Administration has failed to provide covid-19 tests, ventilators, face masks and other protective equipment in this time of need, but it has no problem seeking an extra $20 billion to increase naval forces confronting China.

When Trump withdrew the U.S. from the INF Treaty, suspicions were raised that Trump and the Pentagon’s real agenda was to open the way to deploy intermediate range missiles in the Pacific and Asia. And, while Trump and Putin compete in their deployments of more usable battlefield nuclear weapons, those intermediate range missiles are being deployed in the Western Pacific.

Sorry to say, there is more. Assuming that U.N. Secretary General Gutteres’ call for a global ceasefire doesn’t apply to them, The Chinese and U.S. Navies are challenging one another in disputed South China Sea waters off Malaysia. China recently conducted air and naval drills near Taiwan. The U.S. responded with a massive display **of B-52 bombers in Guam. And, not to be left out, last week a Russian pilot intercepted a U.S. warplane over the Mediterranean, and Moscow continues its limited Action interventions in Ukraine, Syria and Libya.**

China has been strategic in providing medical assistance. Even as the U.S. and China exchange accusations about who was responsible for covid-19, there has been cooperation. Back in December China shared the virus’ genetic code with U.S. authorities, and it has since provided PPE’s and ventilators to New York. Beijing sent medical experts and equipment to Italy and Spain, which not incidentally increases its influence in Europe as part of its Belt and Road Eurasian integration project. Meanwhile, seeing no advantage in aiding Pakistan and Iran, countries already dependent on China, little or no assistance flowed their way.

**Common Security**

The pandemic, midst its horrors and suffering, also opens opportunities. As Arundhati Roy wrote, “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew….It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.”

The pandemic teaches that we are a single interdependent species, and that military first and xenophobic policies threaten our security and survival. This is a moment to revive the concept of Common Security, the paradigm that served as the foundation for the end of the Cold War. Its essence is that achieving mutual survival requires diplomacy leading to win-win agreements that deescalate tensions, result in downward spirals of arms races, enhances mutual security, and brings more justice into the world.

Today Common Security diplomacy urgently needs to focus on cooperation in the development of distribution of pandemic cures and vaccines, on reduction of great power tensions, elimination of nuclear weapons, support for Secretary General Gutteres’ call for a global ceasefire, creating a sustainable climate, and securing economic and social justice.

We have a much work to do even as we are largely confined to our homes, not the least being defending democracy. Let’s dig in and forge humanity’s way forward!